

## May 1918...

In 1914, when war was declared, many lads, caught up in the patriotic fervour, volunteered to go off and fight. Some went looking for adventure, some wanted to defend their homeland, others enlisted because their mates were going and a few were pressured by their peers. Nonetheless all were viewed as heroes. Lads continued enlisting through the following year, though we are concerned with just one of them, a nineteen-year-old cycle mechanic named John Edwards. On 1<sup>st</sup> June 1915, he left his home at 76 Thetford Road and enlisted at the Norfolk Regiment depot in Norwich. Despite loving army life and apparently being a good soldier, within just a few months John Edwards was kicked out of the army.

Sure, John was smaller than most recruits, even by Brandon's standards, measuring just 5-feet 2-inches and weighing 7-stone. Yet, because he told the army he had been handed his call up papers from Brandon's army recruitment officer – Sergeant Charles Edwards; there was no reason to believe John was not telling the truth on his enlistment form. Anyway, the army needed as many men as possible. Short or tall, it didn't matter. Within a few days John was at Colchester barracks with the 10<sup>th</sup> Battalion, Norfolk Regiment. However, John had lied. In fact, 'John' did not even exist. The 'man' who had signed himself as 'John', was in fact sixteen-year-old Edward Edwards. A boy too young to join the army. A fact highlighted by his parents, who were beside themselves with worry and, once they realised where he had gone, wanted him returned home immediately.

Edward was loving army life too much to come home, which led his captain to ask if the boy could stay on as a bugler. William Edwards offered a compromise when he wrote to the army about his son, "*... he is far too young to go into any firing line yet, for a long while I wish him to do home duty only.*" The army referred the matter to the War Office in London, saying the best outcome was to allow Edward to remain in the army, stationed somewhere in Britain until he had reached a proper age. On 20<sup>th</sup> September 1915, the War Office sent a communication outlining their decision. Edward was to be discharged immediately under paragraph 392 (vi)(a) of the King's Regulations – because Edward had lied about his age and was a soldier under the age of seventeen. By the end of the week he was home. Even so, he vowed to return to the army when he was old enough.

Last year, on the day of his eighteenth birthday, Edward gleefully enlisted, in the knowledge that this time no one could lawfully prevent him doing so. Months of training followed, then earlier this year Edward came over to France. Yesterday, 22<sup>nd</sup> May, Edward's unit was pinned down when enemy artillery shells rained down among the men. Any chance of escape was cut off when gas shells exploded on the tracks and roads leading to their trench. The enemy even sent up an observer, hung beneath a huge barrage balloon, to help aim their guns. It was a miracle no one was killed. Today it is too windy for any balloon to get airborne, so the enemy are restricted to firing off the occasional artillery shell toward Edward's position. Despite the lack of accuracy, two men are killed. One of them is Edward. Even with his independent spirit, Edward was unable to totally control his destiny.